

The Whispering Gallery

In Which We Discuss the Front Parlor in Fiction, Issue a Warning to Parents, and Are Disgruntled Over Another Shakespeare Play.

By DONALD ADAMS.

SO far as we can discover the only essential difference in the lives of Phanor Enday and his son Amos, as set forth in "The Parlor Begat Amos," by Arthur S. Hildebrand (Harcourt, Brace & Co.), was that Phanor married on a very cold day and his son Amos on a very hot one. Amos as a boy dreamed of migrating to a mental and spiritual climate completely removed from that in which he grew up, and this was the extent of his success.

The parlor that begat Amos was the parlor of a house in Main Street. We read on the jacket of the book that it is "a study of the influence of the conventional and timid middle class American family on a sensitive boy whose life is stunted by what the atmosphere of the front parlor of his home signified. The book is the story of his struggle to get out of its stuffiness into the freshness of life."

It is a struggle, it seems, in which poor Amos never has a chance. The furniture in the old front parlor is stacked against him. The family motto, Never take a chance, is too much for him in the end. We are left to suppose, when Amos marries, in the last chapter, that his wife will give him just such a parlor as he grew up in as a boy.

When Amos goes to school in the little town of Wilton he can't remember what the exports of China are because he is too occupied in thinking of what China is like. While in high school his best effort at recklessness, an affair with a girl who is looked upon by the good people of Wilton as not quite nice, is destroyed because the girl contracts a fever or something and dies.

Away at boarding school he meets a young lady whose life has not been wrecked by her front parlor. She tells him that to find the larger world he dreams for he must turn his back on things that are sure and go ahead without seeing a single step of the way. But Amos had been taught at home to avoid above all things Uncertainty, Experiment and Failure.

And so he takes the train back to Wilton and marries the nice girl his mother picked out for him. He accepts the job in the mill that his father got for him, the job that means only dreariness and Wilton. On the day of his marriage Amos says: "If I'd known it was going to be a day like this I'd have been in favor of waiting." Phanor said the same thing the day he was married.

All this would be very well if the front parlor and what it typified had never disturbed Amos. But as it did, we think it much more likely that he, like so many other boys and girls who were begotten of horse hair parlors would have found his way to Greenwich Village and hung a studio in orange and black. Such vague yearnings as seethed in the breast of this young man demanded to be poured out over the tea at The Pink Chimpanzee or filtered through the jazz at The Maroon Moose.

We must confess to a lack of trust in the potency of front parlors. A slab sided log cabin begat Lincoln, and many armor hung halls of England begat young men who drive stages in British Columbia. Sometimes we feel that this mysterious influence, "early environment," is a bogey pure and simple, even without falling back on that ancient superstition the iniquitous destiny of every minister's son. People are always surprising you by telling you where they were born.

We may be wrong, but we think Amos would have become a confidence man or that he would have run away from home to do the loop the loop in the circus.

De La Mare.

We experienced some peculiar reactions in reading Walter De La Mare's "The Memoirs of a Midget" (Knopf). We recommend it as a gauge by which to test the extent of one's identification with the jazz epoch. Mr. De La Mare's book might have been published in 1850 or 1750. On second thought we withdraw the earlier date, because had these

memoirs been written then they would probably have been streaked with a coarseness which we did not find in them.

The author purports to present the life story of an Englishwoman born, we guess, some time early in the last century. She was born a midget, of parents who were normal in size. Nowhere in the book are Miss M.'s actual dimensions disclosed. There are delightful hints, subtle approximations. She tells us that as a child she perched on the edge of the library table and read from books propped up conveniently, and that when there was need of turning a page she walked across the table top and turned it.

English critics have found in these memoirs a great newcomer among children's books. Well, there are chapters in it that will delight the most unimaginative of children, but we are ready to wager that the parent who reads it aloud will have cause to mutter incoherent things about Mr. De La Mare for not having told just how small this midget was. There are just a thousand and one questions occurring to us at the moment that "The Memoirs of a Midget" is certain to provoke under such circumstances.

"Could she climb into a thimble, papa?"

"Could she climb into my bed?"

"How big do you think her nose was?"

We dare only to hint at the horrible possibilities.

All of which, of course, is not being quite fair to Mr. De La Mare. There is beauty in this book, as might be expected by any one who knows Mr. De La Mare's poetry. The early chapters, in which Miss M. describes her adjustments to the physical world in which she found herself, are done with a marvelous delicacy. Picture her out of doors:

"My eyes dazzled in colors. The smallest of the marvels of flowers and flies and beetles and pebbles, and the radiance that washed over them, would fill me with a mute, pent up rapture almost unendurable. Butterflies would settle quietly on the hot stones beside me as if to match their raiment against mine. If I proffered my hand with quivering wings and horns they would uncoil their delicate tongues and quaff from it drops of dew or water. A solemn grasshopper would occasionally straddle across my palm, and with patience I made quite an old friend of a harvest mouse. They weigh only two to the halfpenny. This sharp nosed, furry morsel would creep swiftly along to share my crumbs and snuggle itself to sleep in my lap. By and by, I suppose, it took to itself a wife; I saw it no more. Bees would rest there, the panniers of their thighs laden with pollen; and now and then a wasp, his jaws full of wood or meat. When sunbeetles or ants drew near they would seem to pause at my whisper, as if hearkening. As if in their remote silence pondering and sharing the world with me. All childish fancy no doubt; for I proved far less successful with the humans."

As for the maturer years of the Midget, the little adventures of her life with Mrs. Bowater and the strange friendship with Fanny Bowater, there is no reading of them without flinching unless you have power to flee for the time being from this insistent century. There are many pages of the Memoirs that can be read only in a gently creaking rocker with a crocheted back.

A Great Book.

We put it down unequivocally this time. Since we spoke of Sheila Kaye-Smith's new novel, "Joanna Godden," two weeks ago we have found our thoughts returning to it frequently. Any one who cares for craftsmanship that is sure and fine; any one who cares to see the unflinching dissection of one woman's soul will want to read this book.

To our mind, here is one novelist who sees sex proportionately. When our fiction writers discovered that we were not speaking plainly enough they rushed to the task of liberation with a hectic flush on their cheeks. Very often they have mistaken pathology for the study of character. But not Miss Kaye-Smith.

Her Joanna was the sort of woman who would speak of her limbs, and then uncomfortably, but there is no blinking in Miss Kaye-Smith's portrayal of Joanna's half unconscious struggle to make her life complete. There is no blinking, and yet there is no pop eyed wonder that women should be so.

Joanna came of yeoman English stock and lived on the Romney Marsh in Kent; but her story could have been set as well in Florence of the Renaissance, in Plymouth, Mass., 200 years ago, or in Akron, Ohio, 1922.

Another Shakespeare.

We expressed disagreement recently with the view of Shakespeare as a man given us by Clemence Dane in her blank verse drama "Will Shakespeare," declaring our admiration at the same time for Miss Dane's poetry. We have just been reading another Shakespeare play, by Clifford Bax and H. F. Rubinstein (Houghton Mifflin).

These authors, like Miss Dane, seem to feel that they cannot make Shakespeare human, that they cannot bring him down from his high seat of tragedy and make him walk about like other men, unless they picture him crushed and broken by that affair with the Dark Lady of the Sonnets, hurt and permanently embittered by the petty jealousies of his fellow craftsmen.

To us this attitude has little to recommend it. "What ails him?" asks Burbage in this play, of Shakespeare's landlady, Mme. Montjoy, in 1608, when the poet was forty-one.

"But who can tell?" she replies. "He cries out against all the world. He hates women, he hates men, he

hates life. How he will rage against his old friends, calling them traitor, liar, fool, hypocrite! Poor Will, he is sick!"

We are given to understand that he goes back to Stratford to escape from life. He tells a young poet who comes down from London to visit him that he wishes to forget what he has written, that he has no pride whatever in the plays. Come into my garden, he says, for "in that I have some pride, for that is God's work."

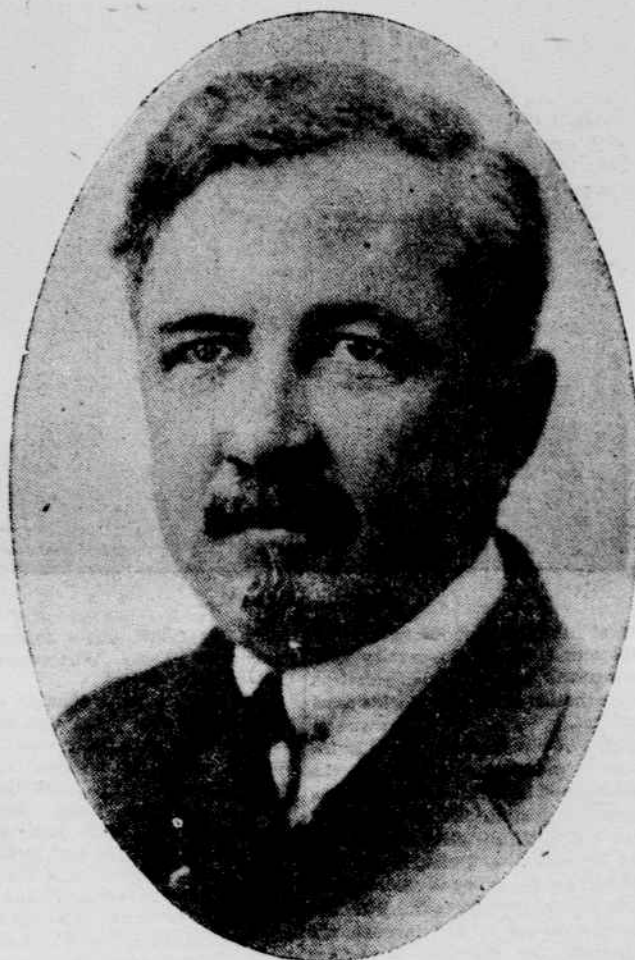
We hear him tell Burbage, while he is working on "Pericles" that he cannot "write well-favoredly in a world that is all corruption, double dealing, lies and lechery—a tournament where he that brays loudest can make sure of the laurels."

That sounds to us like the angry whining of a man who finds himself a failure. Shakespeare, we know, received his laurels, and if he brayed loudly there is no record of it. We gather otherwise.

Bernard Shaw, you know, has a notion that Shakespeare thought of himself as a gentleman, the son of the Alderman, and that he went back to Stratford, after he had attained prosperity, with the fixed idea of restoring the family estate.

Surely the plays reveal a man who had an immense zest in life; there is an almost roughneck gusto there, together with a sense of pity for the shortcomings of mankind which would never have permitted such an outburst as the speech to Burbage; and these considerations incline us to the belief that Shaw's conjecture is more humanly true than the soured return Messrs. Bax and Rubinstein conceive of.

We think it likely Shakespeare went back to Stratford and bought the house, just as 697,000 successful business men return to Carthage, Mo., or Paris, Neb., to let it be known how they have come up in the world.



George H. Doran.

Thirty Days in London

By GEORGE H. DORAN.

IT'S the cynic's belief that when a Little Red Riding Hood of an American publisher goes to London the British authors, like the old wolf, sharpen their teeth the "better to eat him with." Possibly those friends of mine over there, the authors and others who want to be authors, who made my thirty days' stay all too brief because of their friendly attentions had some such idea, a devouring idea, in the back of the head, but it didn't appear in the front, and I write myself down as being sincerely grateful for their true hospitality.

Anyway, I went to London in this unusual season for a certain purpose which was accomplished and have come home again—alive! In

all seriousness this statement is due from me, that I believe there exists at the moment a genuine blood tie between the Englishman and the American, bound somewhat tighter than usual because of the big results obtained at the recent conference at Washington. In my judgment it is permanent. And whatever may be said of our American hospitality, the English have cultivated this art to the highest point, until it has become what it ought to be—simple, sincere and delightful.

A longer stay and a deeper study might have made me an authoritative observer of economical conditions in England now, but in a passing glance it seems that these conditions may be looked at optimistically because of the great and general stress being put on economy, social and national. The English are

not merely preaching economy in the government and in the home, they're practicing it rigidly. Prices are being brought down; railway rates are still high, but the hotels have come down and their service has been restored to the perfection it had before the war. Labor unions are strong in England, but there is a distinct distrust and even hatred for revolutionary theories; the heathen don't dare to rage.

Among my most delightful experiences were talks with Lord Frederick Hamilton at his home near Buckingham Palace. His is a historic house of London, ancient, of course, and with a fence in front of it put up in King John's day. Lord Frederick is 66, a true example of the best of the old school, whose delightful personality is reflected in his books, filled with kindly cartoons, so to speak, of famous people dead and gone. His unblemished face had the same characteristics as a man and a writer. One anecdote Lord Frederick told of him related to his trip to Elba to get an interview with the "Emperor of Elba," as the Powers had made Napoleon. He got it, too, and the story told by the living author seemed to take the auditor way back to the dawn of the nineteenth century.

Lord Shaw of Dumfermline, one of the great law lords, entertains simply and delightfully at his house, 9 Bolton Gardens, where I renewed acquaintance with several writers who are not ashamed to call themselves "Victorian," but rather glory in it. The host puts no embargo on modern men, however, and several of the best known were there as dinner guests on January 24. It was grateful for me to renew my old association with Sinclair Lewis, who is being feted and petted in London, but bears his honors modestly. He has just finished a book and will join his wife in Rome.

Too busy to do much entertaining myself, still I did give a small stag dinner in my rooms at the Savoy, where Hugh Walpole, Frank Swinerton and E. V. Lucas were my guests. I had asked Somerset Maugham, too, and Arnold Bennett. The latter left London on the day of my little party to join Bertie Sullivan (known as "G. and S." because of his connection with the Sullivan of Gilbert and Sullivan fame). They are now at Monte Carlo with a yacht in the offing to escape to when things get too thick. I am bringing out new novels by Maugham, Swinerton and Walpole, also one by Richard Dehan, "The Gate of Hope." Lucas is a man of 53, a delightfully chatty as his books would indicate.

Speaking of Gilbert and Sullivan I saw two revivals of their famous pieces, both given magnificently, "Iolanthe" with a stage splendor I have never seen surpassed. It is the hope of a good many Americans in London that these revivals, cast and production entire, may be brought over here. My only other theatrical evening was in seeing Milne's last play, "What Happened to Blayd?"

"Mount Everest," a journal of last summer's expedition to explore the top of the world, which now is in the line of accomplishment, is a book being brought out under the auspices of the Royal Geographical Society. It will have a prodigious success; almost every Englishman loves adventure and sport and will feel that he must read this book.

If there is any feeling of discouragement among the big London publishers it is due to the killing off of promising talent in the war. War books are still being written but they are not being read. The tendency there is what it is here, toward serious works, preferably books of personality, or books about persons who directed and made events rather than events themselves.

I spent an agreeable and busy thirty days. I bring back a sense of an atmosphere of good will that was given out universally and was not, by any means, confined to the "Authors I Have Met," charming companions as they were. Expressed by the stranger Englishman or the trainee was a hearty admiration for America. This is so genuine and so widespread that it can't help getting over into literature that the next few years will make.

Dodd, Mead & Co. will publish about March 1 "The Letters of Paul Gauguin," which have been translated from the French. Frederick O'Brien, author of "White Shadows in the South Seas," has written an introduction to the book. It was edited under his personal supervision.